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NSC BRIEFING

9 July 1953

THE ASSOCIATED STATES SITUATION

The French note of 3 July to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos was a vaguely worded offer to "perfect" the independence of the three Associated States. Even French officials in Indochina criticized its vagueness, which apparently resulted from conflicting views on Indochina policy within the French cabinet and a desire to determine the American attitude before taking a decisive step.

Although the note itself granted no concessions to the Associated States, its implication that the basic accords of 1949 are subject to renegotiation is an advance over France's previous position: that these must remain firm until defeat of the Viet Minh.

That a basic change in France's Indochina policy is in the making is also indicated by the appointment of Maurice Dejean as Commissioner General. Dejean, who has been the French

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ambassador in Tokyo, is a career diplomat and a Far Eastern expert. His assignment to Indochina represents a clean break with the Letourneau regime.

The demand in the French Assembly for some solution to the Indochina problem is undoubtedly stronger now than ever before. Just before the 3 July note was sent, Vice Premier Paul Reynaud, who is now in charge of Indochina affairs, told Ambassador Dillon that this sentiment might force France to negotiate with Ho Chi Minh with a view to withdrawal. Reynaud, however, exaggerated the parliamentary sentiment and in any case no satisfactory negotiations with Ho are possible. His remarks appear to have been designed primarily to ascertain what further American commitments were available.

After receiving the French note, Cambodian officials in Phnom Penh and Paris commented that they were looking for deeds, not promises. The king, who is staying away from his capital,

has not yet given his views. He has been demanding a status like that of Pakistan within the British Commonwealth, and has said that once it is granted he will negotiate a treaty of friendship and alliance with France. The king's popularity and his unequivocal stand make abandonment of his demands improbable.

During the present crisis with the king, the French have sent two North African battalions to Cambodia, plus armored units. French Union forces in Cambodia total 19 battalions, but these include those of the French-officered Royal Cambodian Army. The French consider that only five battalions, consisting mostly of African troops, would be loyal to them in the unlikely event of a clash with the king's forces. In addition to the Cambodian troops, the king could also rely on the support of the Khmer Issaraks, anti-French dissident bands totalling some 3,000.

Realizing his difficult situation, General De Langlade, the French Commander in Cambodia, urged Paris in late June to

meet the king's demands. He saw no possibility of the king's backing down and was certain that once he was dealt with as an equal he would cooperate with the French. Even Jean Risterucci, the French High Commissioner, who is an old colonial hand, has declared his willingness to go to Paris to argue for Cambodian independence.

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh, which has long operated in Cambodia and whose total numbers there include 1,000 regulars and about 8,000 others, are watching for a clash and the unique opportunities it would provide them.

In Vietnam, the French note was generally received with considerable reserve, but Bao Dai and his premier undoubtedly hoping to force the French hand, expressed appreciation for the "promise of total independence." Vietnam realizes that it will benefit from any concessions won by Cambodia.

The Laotian Government also expressed warm appreciation for the note, but the possibility of greater independence

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apparently brought home to officials there their country's wholly inadequate defenses against a renewed Viet Minh invasion after the monsoon rains end in September.

While the relationship of the Associated States to France is in a state of flux, the military situation is quiet. No major activity is expected until the end of the rainy season next fall. At that time, renewed Viet Minh activity against Laos as well as against the Tonkin delta is probable. The French report that Chinese supply to the Viet Minh has increased from an average of 500 tons to 800 tons a month since January.

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